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Adrienne Lafayette

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Recommended Citation

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Letter from Adrienne de Lafayette to her Children, written while she was imprisoned in Paris during the French Revolution

Translated by Tama Lea Engelking, Associate Professor of French, Cleveland State University

The 17th Brumaire, November 1794 ¹

It has been a long time since you have received any news directly from me my dear children, but the citoyennes (women citizens) who come often know how I am doing, have given some of this news to you, and you should not judge my heart less well than I judge yours, and know from me, as I know from you, that we never stop being concerned about each other, even when we do not savor the consolation of repeating it to each other.

I was awaiting some news about my freedom to tell you, then I was awaiting a response to my letter to Georges, and I have not yet received any answer. Le Plessis, having become a tribunal prison, it was necessary for me to be transferred elsewhere, being not at the accused status, I was first at a house, on rue Amandiers, at the extreme edge of Paris, then the day before yesterday, as they emptied that house, they sent me along with five other people who were living there, to another on rue Notre Dame des Champs. ² Each place seems quite the same to me, my dear children, as long as I am not with you, it is the only thing that interests me, however I am not doing badly physically and the twenty men among whom I am the only female (who were reduced to fifteen yesterday) are very polite and do not bother me at all. But let us get to the business at hand. That of getting nearer to you. I believe that we have finally found a good means, that of addressing my self to Citizen Colombel in charge of relations for the detainees from the department of Haute Loire. ³ One of the citoyennes who was there for me, has been well received by him, but he is making trouble about some original papers that have not been presented to him, and that we only have in copies, you know that the Minister of the United States misplaced them during a move. Five weeks ago he wrote to Brioude, for another dispatch to be sent. He has not received a reply. I am not without hope that he could make Colombel understand how sincere he is, that the papers have been lost, and that he look upon the copies collected by the American Minister as the papers, but in case they do not reach him, I am requesting that you, my dear child, insist on the expedition of the same papers that have already been sent to me. It is difficult to understand that this is such complicated business, but it is highly possible that my freedom will be obtained by this means, but it is also possible that it depends on the arrival of these papers, and it takes less than a quarter hour to copy them, one at the concierge of the house of arrest, the other at the house of Monbrizet Captain of the Police, who summoned me. If he is on tour, the national agent should have a copy of that second paper, which is the order from the Committee of General Safety about the first days of the prairial (the ninth month of the French Republican calendar) . It is not what I would desire although one could also find the warrant of arrest (which was read to me at Chavaniac) and the order of Reynaud which motivated it, and which Granchier had read, if they can be found, that would be very useful, but it should not delay the sending of others for that. That would be for another mail. If the municipality of Aurac also wrote his opinion of my case, in order to reclaim me, that would do some good, but I have a slight hope that all that would be superfluous. What is essential is not to lose time sending the original papers, of which I have already presented copies. I was expecting this delay since I learned that Monroe had misplaced my papers, and that he would fix his mistake with so little activity. But I have the terrible habit of patience, and it is enough to think of you, my dear children, so as to never become discouraged. It is your situation that I find more painful to endure than my own, I feel for myself only the supplications of my heart. It is to soften yours by my presence, and by my care, as well as those of all who surround you, that is the object of my wishes; it is impossible for me to manage from afar, and deprived of my freedom. If my captivity should endure (which I really do not believe possible) I will decide to bring you a little closer to me. I will tell you my project in that regard, as soon as my business with Colombel is concluded, and according to all appearances, the result will be to reunite me with you, in very little time. Therefore take all courage, and judge all, the tender sentiments of my heart which are known to you to

all.

Take the best of care of each other, of my aunt, of she who is taking the place of mother. I wait for the response of your brother at any moment with keen emotion.⁴ If he is still with you, tell him, as well as Citizen Félix, that they are well aware of all that I feel for them, and must judge that I am awaiting news from them with impatience.

Farewell, my dear children, I embrace you that maternal tenderness that is the concern and consolation of my life. Those who second it, can judge my feelings.

N. Lafayette

At the Desnos house, rue Notre dame Deschamps in Paris, this 17th Brumaire.

I learned this morning that Citizen Castan finally obtained justice and his freedom, that really did me a world of good. Try to let my poor companions in detention know how I am doing.

NOTES:

1. Brumaire is the second month of the French Republican calendar. The new calendar was adopted in October, 1793 to replace a calendar deemed irrational, inconvenient, and a vehicle of Christian propaganda. Twelve months, composed of three 10-day weeks called *décades* was created. The months were given “natural” descriptive names reflecting the weather and seasons. Each year ended with five or six extra days called *Sans-culottides* which were dedicated to a series of national celebrations. The new calendar was in place until 1804 (an XII) when Napoleon decided to abandon it.

2. Le Plessis, the prison to which Adrienne was transferred in Paris, served as a sort of depot for prisoners headed for the Conciergerie and the guillotine. Twenty or so prisoners were loaded into a cart each day from Le Plessis and taken to the Revolutionary Tribunal where they were condemned to be beheaded. Ironically, the Prison du Plessis had been converted from a school that the young Gilbert de Lafayette had once attended!

Adrienne's grandmother, mother and sister had been guillotined in July, 1794, three of the thousands of French citizens killed during Robspierre's “Terror” which ended with his death on July 23, 1794. Over a period of two years, about one million men, women and children (almost 4% of the entire population of France!) had been sent to prison; seventeen thousand of them lost their heads to the guillotine, another 183,000 were killed by police and soldiers, and thousands of others were simply “lost,” never heard from again. Adrienne was freed on January 22, 1795 after spending sixteen months in prison. According to Lafayette biographer Harlow Giles Unger, Adrienne was left in prison but not placed on the list of those to be killed because her husband was recognized as a “Friend of Washington.” Robspierre apparently did not want to risk turning the neutral United States against France by killing someone so closely associated with the American president. Unger also relates how James Monroe, the new American Ambassador to France, was able to win Adrienne's release by visiting her, along with his wife, while she was imprisoned. Their visits became a source of embarrassment for the Committee of General Safety, which then ordered the release of Madame de Lafayette.

3. During the revolution, all titles of address were changed to eliminate any elitism. La marquise de Lafayette was simply referred to as “La femme Lafayette,” although “Citizen” was adopted as the most

common form of address.

4. Adrienne was making plans to have her son, George-Washington Lafayette, sent to America where she hoped his godfather, President George Washington, would care for him. The president felt, however, that personally providing sanctuary for Lafayette's son might compromise the neutrality of the United States. He sent the fifteen-year old George to study at Harvard, incognito, under the care of Massachusetts senator George Cabot. George was also accompanied by his faithful tutor, Frestel. The president wrote to his godson: "To begin to fulfill my role of father, I advise you to apply yourself seriously to your studies. Your youth should be usefully employed, in order that you may deserve in all respects to be considered as the worthy son of your illustrious father." Eventually the president's feelings for Lafayette's family triumphed over diplomacy, and he invited George to live at Mount Vernon. George returned to France in February, 1798, after spending four years in America.